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WILL PREACHING DISAPPEAR?

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If we were to answer the question in the title of this article we should be tempted to say "it will depend upon the preacher." As a matter of fact folks like to be talked to. Notwithstanding the popularity of the moving picture, people still have ears as well as eyes. Information, it is true, may come better through the eye, but instruction comes just as truly through the ear. Printer's ink, important as it is, will never replace the human voice.

Many a modern preacher would like to follow Elijah out into the desert or sit with Jonah under his gourd. It has grown continually harder to operate the conventional church. In this church the people give rather more attention to every activity than they do to the preaching, unless it be the midweek prayer meeting. Can it be that Paul was all wrong about the world being saved by the foolishness of preaching? Is it to be saved by Sunday newspapers, magazines, and occasional lectures?

The church statistics are eloquent about what is happening in the open country. The old-time rural churches disappear every year. In Illinois a single denomination has lost a hundred such churches in a decade, and this loss is paralleled in other states and in other denominations.

In the city the situation is equally desperate. The Presbyterians have sold two meetinghouses to the Jews on the South Side of Chicago in three months. On the West Side every denomination is in retreat. A prominent city mission superintendent of one of the evangelical denominations confesses that he is spending most of his time "sitting up with

sick churches." Most evangelical denominations have made no gains in cities of the first rank in America in recent years.

In cities of the middle class there is a better report with regard to church membership. But it can scarcely be said that preaching is in more favor. In a county-seat town a church has a men's Bible class on Sunday morning with a hundred men. Less than one-fourth stay for the preaching service which follows. In these towns there are various "series" of sermons which offer choice bait to the unwary. The day of churches with standing room only at the preaching service has long been over.

Once the challenge of the infidel and the opposition of the saloon crowd gave the pulpit an enemy to attack. But the saloon is all but buried, and infidelity is as dead as preaching is and probably much more so. The average minister fails to find a worth-while enemy. Any student of the history of oratory and of preaching knows that the pulpit or the platform needs an enemy. Amos denounces the king and his worldly priests. Savonarola preaches against the sins and sinners

of Florence. Cicero denounces Catiline. The modern preacher has the much tamer task of "preaching the gospel" as that phrase is interpreted by orthodox deacons.

Meanwhile there has grown up a large stay-at-home vote in religion. The men and women in negligée on the front porch at the church hour, immersed in Sunday paper or fancy work, tell the story of those who say that they "worship God at home." Probably the religion of such is largely pretense, but there is no denying that they are "good" people. They keep the commandments and contribute to the popular charities. They just do not go to church and seem to have no interest in the problems that occupy the minds of church people.

The effort of the pulpit in modern times to overcome this increasing lethargy has assumed various forms. We went through a period of sensational sermon subjects. One blushes at them yet. We hope that most people have forgotten them, so no quotations will be made. Almost any man can figure out a sensational topic, but to create a whole sermon that is as sensational as the topic is far more difficult. These sensational sermons were quite as misleading as the movie shows which suggestively state that "no children are admitted."

There came also the sensationalism of a certain type of liberal. For a while there was an audience for men in "people's" churches, where the preacher exposed the fallacies and superstitions of the popular religion to the enjoyment of people who were greatly relieved to find that there is no hell, and who proposed to have a much better time since they had found out that there isn't

any. But it does not take long to deny everything that has ever been asserted by religion, so the unorganized free-lance churches disappeared even before orthodoxy began to feel their shafts very much.

With the pews in most churches lamentably empty, it is now time to make some most radical suggestions about the future of preaching. Some think that preaching is to disappear. The Young Men's Christian Association will have its prestige enormously increased by the war. The Y.M.C.A. and the Y.W.C.A. will combine to form the religious institution of the future, whose program will not be preaching but tennis and baths and Bible classes.

Dr. MacAfee, in a most suggestive pamphlet, would save the modern minister by changing him into a community leader with administrative duties in a community church. There would be occasional preaching by national celebrities who had a great message. He fails to state where these celebrities would be trained, or how they would ever be sifted out of the stacks of homiletical chaff, were we to abolish the local preacher.

It is not likely that preaching will disappear. There have always been prophets, philosophers, and preachers, all of them working at the solution of life-problems, whether of the individual or of the community. It is easier for the community to think when it is challenged to thought by intelligent preaching. We shall one of these days discover why preaching has lost its popularity.

The evangelical pulpit has exhorted people until the people in desperation

have fled. The preacher has been told that he must denounce sin. He has prepared sermons on the dance, the theater, and the low-neck dress. People have been scolded and advised *ad nauseam*. Young cubs have delivered sermons to parents on their parental duties. In these sermons there have been many calories of heat, but no more light than a glowworm emits. There has been no solid basis of fact, no unifying philosophy of life underneath.

The preacher might often have delivered a good sermon, but he has been told continually that the way to get an audience is to observe the denominational days, or to preach the gospel the way someone did it twenty years ago. He is often a hireling under our democracy, and it is hard to stand against popular pressure and give the people sermons which they think they do not want (but really do), or deny them sermons which they think they want (but under which they go to sleep).

When the revival of the preaching art comes, as it is sure to do either inside or outside the church, there will be a radical change in message, in method, and in spirit.

Preaching has been dead because people no longer believe many of the old doctrines. I found an old grandmother near death the other day and asked her if she hoped for another life. She still prays in faith to God, but she told me that she had lost faith in "heaven" at a time when most people gain it. The doctrinal possessions of the average Christian are a strange and unrelated body of faith. The pulpit of the new day will not preach old sermons. It will not indulge in a carping and critical

attitude as "liberal" preachers have often done. In a constructive spirit a defensible body of religious ideas, well co-ordinated, will be set forth. Already there is a little library of religious books, written in the past five years, which interpret God and the religious experience from the social (not the social-service) viewpoint.

The pulpit must find new modes of expressing itself. When Dr. Ames preached the funeral sermon of a living friend it was sensational, but not in the old, yellow way. Some of the war writers have taught us to phrase religion in a new and human way. Many a man would not know what a traducianist is, but he does understand the clean, manly talks of Donald Hankey.

Above all, the pulpit must regain its apostolic fervor. This can come only by a man preaching his own faith and not that of his grandfather. The preacher must know every time he steps behind the sacred desk just why he is there.

Probably the pulpit must make room for women and laymen—various types of occasional preachers other than the ordained men. Some of these will have a true word to say. Those who do not will help to make the trained preacher appear at his true value.

Once the conventional type of preaching was fortified behind the impregnable breastwork of success. Today this preaching is no longer successful. Since it is success that gives the only authority we mortals know, we may hope that a new, vital, human kind of preaching will arise and establish itself by the response of a people who are now ready for better things.